

SPECIAL EVENTS

*The Faculty of Music,
University of Toronto*

*Concert Hall,
Edward Johnson Building*

VEGH QUARTET

*Sandor Végh, first violin Georges Janzer, viola
Sandor Zöldy, second violin Paul Szabo, cello*

*Thursday, March 25, 1965
8:30 p.m.*

Programme

QUARTET IN D MINOR, D. 810 (DEATH AND THE MAIDEN) *Franz Schubert*

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro vivace

Presto

The D minor Quartet was composed in 1824, shortly after that in A minor. But whereas the A minor was published immediately, this companion-work remained unpublished until three years after Schubert's death.

The slow movement of the work is a set of variations on motives from the song *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, composed by Schubert in 1817. A dominating idea in the finale recalls the seductive phrase sung by the "Erlking" (i.e., the figure of Death) in another famous early song of his. These associations have often led to a "programmatic" interpretation of the Quartet: it has been taken as a musical expression of his own forebodings of early death. While no specific indications of this intention survive, and therefore it cannot be carried very far, its general basis seems sound enough. Aside from the two "death" motives quoted, we have these factors: (1) Schubert's frequent serious illnesses, which many times brought him close to death; (2) his constant tendency to place himself at the centre-of-feeling of his music, for instance, his identification with the pathetic hero of the song-cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*. Thus if the Quartet is a musical essay on death, Schubert was no doubt thinking towards his own. One notes further that the Quartet contains romanticism's characteristic vivid contrasts of mood, counterbalancing especially the idyllic and the morbid, as seen again in *Die schöne Müllerin*, where the romantic love-story ends in a rather grisly drowning.

The first movement presents an incisive and virile opening motive, which not only recurs many times here but is also strongly hinted at in the finale. The main contrasting theme starts in typical ingratiating "Wiener Wald" style, but develops intensity, while at the same time veering into minor-key shadows. The development section proper combines the two themes.

The variation-theme is in three sections: the first is taken from the piano introduction to the original song, the second is newly written, and the third is the music accompanying the consoling words of "Death" in the song. Thus actually the maiden's words are not directly suggested at all. The variations retain the shape, harmonies, and basic rhythmic pulsation of the theme, entwining ever more florid and inventive violin-figurations.

The scherzo and the finale share a driving, dance-like force. In this context, they have been called "dances of death" — the one a march, the

other a tarantella. Both have insistent beating rhythms and accentual grace-notes, adding to their forceful expression. But in each, dramatic contrast is provided — in the scherzo's swaying trio-section and in the exhilarating (and brilliantly contrapuntal) second theme of the finale.

— INTERMISSION —

QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 41, No. 1

Robert Schumann

Introduzione: Andante espressivo — Allegro

Scherzo: Presto

Adagio

Presto

With his tendency to concentrate on one medium at a time, Schumann wrote all three string quartets of his Opus 41 in a few months of 1842; thoughts and sketches for them had been accumulating, however, over the previous two to three years. The works were published in 1843 with a dedication to Felix Mendelssohn.

The A minor Quartet is notable for its successful, but still quite evident, struggles to escape Schumann's dominantly pianistic ways of thinking (the main theme of the slow movement still almost makes one wish the string quartet had a damper-pedal). Though officially in A minor, its movements vascillate between A minor (introduction, scherzo, finale) and F major (allegro, trio, adagio), ending finally in a vibrant burst of A major. Unifying the textures of the various movements are the frequent passages of imitative counterpoint — starting with the very opening bars of the introduction and carrying through, especially, the fugatos of both first and last movements.

The first allegro, set in romantic perspective by its introduction, is a lyrical and ardent piece, reminiscent of Schubert, with a martial second theme and a development that suggests the weaving of some fantastic "Black Forest" fairytale. The scherzo compliments Mendelssohn by evoking his magical *Midsummer Night's Dream* style, but Schumann follows more his own habits in writing a slower-paced and more introspective "intermezzo" to serve as contrasting trio-section. The Adagio is a simple song-like piece, which grows, from its initial piano-reverie theme, more and more into the idiom of the quartet. The brilliant finale suggests the folk- or fairytale-world again, especially in its second theme. Endearingly Schumannesque is the still moment in moderato tempo just before the end.

Notes by John Beckwith